UNITED
NATIONS

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Economic and Social Council

Distr.
LIMITED

E/CN.6/1994/L.5/Add.1
11 March 1994

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
Thirty-eighth session
7-18 March 1994
Agenda item 8

ADOPTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS THIRTY-EIGHTH SESSION

Draft report

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Chapter ___

PREPARATIONS FOR THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN: ACTION FOR EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

1. The Commission considered item 6 of its agenda at its 1st to 6th and ___ meetings, from 7 to 9 and ___ March 1994. It had before it the following documents:

(a) Report of the Secretary-General on preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace (E/CN.6/1994/9);

(b) Report of the Secretary-General on the draft platform for action (E/CN.6/1994/10);

(c) Report of the Inter-sessional Working Group of the Commission on the Status of Women (E/CN.6/1994/12);

(d) Report of the Secretary-General containing a preliminary version of the updated World Survey on the Role of Women in Development (E/CN.6/1994/13);

(e) Note by the Secretariat on the draft provisional rules of procedure of the Conference (E/CN.6/1994/L.3).

General debate

2. In her introductory statement the Secretary-General of the Fourth World Conference on Women referred to the preparatory activities which had been undertaken by the Conference secretariat, the United Nations system, Governments, and non-governmental organizations, including the appointment by the Secretary-General of the United Nations of a High-level Advisory Group of eminent persons to facilitate the preparations and to play an advocacy role for global action. She noted that other United Nations conferences - including the World Conference on Human Rights, which placed the human rights of women on the human rights agenda; the International Conference on Population and Development, which would address the need for a new definition and interpretation of productive and reproductive rights and the shared responsibilities of men and women; and the World Summit on Social Development, focusing on the alleviation and eradication of poverty and problems of employment and social integration - were part of the framework for the preparatory work and for the Conference itself. At its thirty-eighth session, the Commission on the Status of Women, through further elaboration of the draft Platform for Action, should enable the secretariat to complete a revised, action-oriented draft before the last preparatory meeting, in 1995. The road to Beijing should be paved with vision, commitment and a determination by Governments, civil society and non-governmental organizations to create a strong image of women as agents of change and full citizens with rights and responsibilities. The broader participation of non-governmental organizations, including those without consultative status, would widen the constituency and support actions towards the advancement of women in society.

3. In an address to the Commission, the President of Ireland, Ms. Mary Robinson, stressed the historical role played by the United Nations Decade for Women and the three world conferences on women in raising awareness and changing attitudes surrounding women's issues and the role and status of women in society. Although only some of the many targets had been reached, the entry into force of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the outcome of the 1985 Nairobi Conference and the adoption by the General Assembly of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women were major steps on the path towards equality. She also emphasized the importance of the Commission on the Status of Women, with its aim of bringing women closer to the decision-making process in all societies. As women moved more into public life, a greater emphasis on the human rights of minorities, partnership and different styles of leadership had emerged. The empowerment of women could contribute to the resolution of disputes through conciliation, consensus and the development of a peaceful civil order. She emphasized the importance of education, technology, job opportunities and the elimination of violence. One sign of visible change and social evolution was the performance by women in new roles in society as equal partners with men. Partnership and sharing were gradually replacing the old stereotypes that had prevented women from taking on leadership tasks. The Conference should further empower women everywhere to take advantage of all the resources at their disposal. She expressed confidence that the Platform for Action would further advance the gains in equality already achieved and would make a major contribution to the advancement of women.

4. In view of the limited time left before the Conference, many representatives stressed the importance of accelerating the pace of the preparations, increasing efficiency and determining what remained to be done to ensure success. One representative mentioned the great demand for information about the Conference and urged the Department of Public Information to produce material for dissemination. Another proposed maintaining the original motto and logo of the World Conference of the International Women's Year (Mexico City, 1975), to facilitate rapid identification.

5. Many representatives stressed the importance of the Conference as a means of giving momentum to the issue of the advancement of women and of revitalizing the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies. A few representatives added that those goals were of particular importance in light of the changes occurring in the world and the difficulties being faced in social, economic and political arenas.

6. Several representatives indicated that the Conference must be considered not as an isolated event but rather as one in concert with other major international events, particularly the World Conference on Human Rights, the forthcoming International Conference on Population and Development, and the World Summit for Social Development. One representative signalled the importance of incorporating the gender perspective if the General Assembly was to adopt an agenda for development.

7. Several representatives welcomed the appointment by the Secretary-General of the High-level Advisory Group of eminent persons with worldwide experience to follow preparations for the Conference. One representative welcomed the preliminary version of the updated World Survey on the Role of Women in Development, the draft rules of procedure for the Conference, which followed precedents established by other international events, and the decisions taken on the participation of observers and non-governmental organizations.

8. Regarding preparations at the national level, many representatives reported on the establishment of national committees or focal points, most of which consisted of governmental and non-governmental representatives. In one country, the Committee was established through a broad election process. Several representatives acknowledged the preparations being undertaken by the host country, which reported on its activities in disseminating information and mobilizing the country. Preparations at the national level included information campaigns, the publication of leaflets, posters, special programmes in the mass media, the organization of workshops, and training - all heavily attended by non-governmental organizations. In some countries national preparations consisted of activities centred on such issues as violence against women, decision-making, women and the mass media, the role of women in development, and the plight of rural women.

9. Some representatives addressed the lack of resources which might prevent some countries and non-governmental organizations from participating in the preparatory activities and the Conference itself. Thus, assistance should be provided by donor countries and international institutions, including the United Nations system.

10. Many reports were given on regional and subregional preparatory activities. All of the regional commissions urged their respective Governments to accelerate the preparation of national reports and to participate actively in the regional preparatory meetings. Delegates and the representatives of the United Nations system cited some of the specific regional concerns that would be highlighted at those meetings, such as the empowerment of women, democratization, the role of women in development, education and health, poverty, and the situation of rural women.

General comments on the draft Platform for Action

11. Many representatives welcomed the draft Platform for Action. It incorporated most of the suggestions put forward by the Inter-sessional Working Group and constituted a solid basis for further work. Many representatives reiterated that the Platform for Action should set clear priorities and be concise, action-oriented, imaginative and written in language easily understandable by women at the grass-roots level in every part of the world. It should clearly identify action at the national, regional and international levels which would lead to commitments to take the necessary measures and establish accountability for implementation.

12. According to many representatives, the Platform should reflect universal problems without ignoring differing circumstances in different countries. It was important to deal appropriately in the Platform with the specific needs of certain groups of women. Mention was made, in particular, of rural women and elderly women, and of the concerns of refugee, displaced and migrant women. The need to take a life-cycle approach throughout was stressed. The importance of providing equal opportunities for women with disabilities was also mentioned.

13. Many representatives stated that the linkage between the status of women, population and environment, as clearly acknowledged in Agenda 21, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, the expected outcome of the United Nations Conference on Population and Development and the United Nations World Summit for Social Development, and the plans for the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations should form part of the Platform for Action.

14. One representative recalled the five forward-looking goals adopted by the Commission on the Status of Women at its thirty-seventh session, which were meant as slogans with a kind of conceptual framework for a new century and a new concept of women and their roles as citizens in society. Another representative suggested linking the Platform for Action - in particular, its strategies and actions - to domestic political realities. The best practical examples of successful programmes should be presented in the Platform.

15. A few representatives called for a realistic assessment of provisions made for the preparatory process. One representative pointed out that constructive dialogue between the secretariat and member States and among member States themselves was crucial, as were informal consultations between the regular sessions. The duration of the thirty-ninth session of the Commission should be extended in order to make possible intensive discussion of the draft Platform for Action and the outcome of the regional conferences. Another representative

suggested convening an expert group meeting dedicated to institutional arrangements.

16. With regard to the statement of mission in the draft Platform, it was noted that the increased participation of women in all spheres of society was not only an objective in itself but also a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development. A representative of certain specialized agencies of the United Nations system stated that the new ethic for sustainable development should be reflected in the statement. The eradication of poverty was cited as a top priority by many representatives and non-governmental organizations.

17. Many representatives stressed the need to strengthen the section on a global framework by including in it a review and appraisal of the achievements realized and the obstacles met since 1985, giving special attention to external factors and public policies. They also proposed including relevant suggestions made at the international and regional conferences and in other activities that had an impact on women. Most of the representatives suggested highlighting a positive image of women and the positive impact of their participation in development and in decision-making. Many also stressed the need to take into account differences between countries and regions.

18. Some representatives pointed out that the advancement of women had been affected at all levels by exogenous factors and by public policies and strategies for development such as structural adjustment programmes. The negative aspects of those policies had resulted in deteriorating socio-economic conditions in many parts of the world and in growing levels of conflict. On the other hand, new opportunities were being created as a result of ongoing democratic processes and the transition to market economies.

19. Referring to the part of the draft Platform on critical areas of concern, most delegates noted the need for further elaboration and analysis. Some delegates suggested making special reference to migrant, refugee and rural women, in the sections on poverty and environment. The need for a life-cycle approach was stressed by several representatives and certain United Nations agencies. Others suggested new critical areas of concern, such as the poor conditions of employment of working parents, the unequal sharing of family responsibilities, and unequal participation in science and technology. One representative questioned the need for a critical area of concern related to the environment. A few representatives thought that the list was too exhaustive and wanted to prioritize it more drastically.

20. Many representatives stressed the importance for the empowerment of women of their participation in decision-making in all areas. Some emphasized the need for women to become full and equal citizens, active in all spheres of life and responsible for the future of their societies and of the world. Without the active participation of women, democracy would not be complete, and parity and partnership would never be fully achieved. Cooperation between men and women was viewed as indispensable for the creation of a democratic and participatory society. The need to change the structures and processes of power was emphasized. It was pointed out that in many countries the number of women in Parliament was decreasing.

21. Some delegates referred to the role and place of national machinery and emphasized its importance in the preparations for the Conference at the national level. Some pointed out that the preparatory process provided a good opportunity for sustaining and strengthening the role of such machinery.

22. Most representatives considered women's human rights a key issue for the Platform for Action. One representative stressed that many other issues would require no further discussion if the human rights of women were fully realized and if there was universal adherence to human rights instruments.

23. Many representatives welcomed the results of the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action, adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights, which finally recognized that the human rights of women and the girl-child were an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights and set the basis for their implementation and protection in accordance with international standards.

24. The goals of universal ratification by all States of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women remained a top goal, and the removal of reservations to it was urged. The appointment of a Special Rapporteur on Violence against women was welcomed.

25. Several representatives emphasized that reference to international standards other than those of the Convention, especially those pertaining to human rights and labour standards, including the protection of migrant workers, needed to be included in the Platform for Action. Sexual harassment should not be omitted from the recommended legislation or administrative rules and procedures.

26. Several representatives insisted that initiatives to increase legal literacy must be intensified among women and men. The need for legal aid for poor women, gender fairness in the judicial system, and gender sensitivity in the training of lawyers and judges was expressed.

27. Many representatives felt that the problems of rural women required special attention and pointed to the relationship between poverty and having complete responsibility for children.

28. Many representatives acknowledged that education needed to be considered very seriously as the key to development and the most effective anti-poverty policy. Education and health were critical factors for reproductive rights and sound population policies, since the linkages between increased levels of education and the exercise of reproductive choice and fertility regulation were evident.

29. A representative speaking for a group of specialized United Nations agencies reported that gender parity in primary and secondary education was achieved in only two regions of the world. Several speakers welcomed the emphasis on the relevance of science and engineering training for girls and women. Other representatives noted that the decline in economic growth negatively affected the education of girls.

30. Public education in the sense of changing public opinion was important for educating a new generation of men and women working together. One representative emphasized the fact that educational choices led to a clear occupational segregation and needed to be abolished. The educational sectors traditionally chosen by women should be reviewed.

31. Several representatives stressed that access to health services, including family planning, should be affordable and acceptable. They stated that the health patterns of women differed from those of men and that women's health was deteriorating with the emergence of AIDS. The problem of traditional practices and the need to eliminate female genital mutilation was mentioned by the representative of one non-governmental organization.

32. Many representatives stated that the elimination of violence against women stood out as a particularly crucial issue and was one of the most extreme violations of women's human rights. They welcomed the adoption of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence by the General Assembly. One representative stated that all efforts to promote equality and development would fail if a peaceful and violence-free environment could not be ensured for women. Economic empowerment plus legal protection of their rights could help women in resisting domestic victimization.

33. A representative speaking for a group of specialized United Nations agencies suggested analysing the historical, social and cultural origins of violence. The incidence of violence in the workplace needed to be studied. The particular vulnerability of stateless women such as refugees and displaced women who could no longer avail themselves of their Government's legal protection was highlighted. One observer suggested facilitating the removal of refugee women from conflict areas. Several representatives stressed that trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of prostitution needed to be addressed. One representative suggested establishing a working group to analyse and revise the 1950 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others.

34. It was observed that war-related violence was increasing and that in some parts of the world women were deliberately and systematically subjected to physical abuse and atrocities. Appropriate strategies needed to be formulated to curb State-sponsored violence against women and to bring the perpetrators to justice.

35. Some representatives suggested that women's involvement in creating and sustaining peaceful societies should be seen in a perspective broader than that of peace-keeping and should include reconciliation, peaceful resolution of conflicts and dialogue.

36. A few representatives welcomed the addition of a priority theme on women and the media and stressed the role of the mass media in raising gender awareness through education and public information. The effect of global information networks needed to be brought out more clearly. It was suggested that the role of the mass media in portraying women and greater participation of women in the mass media should be addressed.

37. A few representatives expressed their concern with regard to the practicality of using the media to promote equality between women and men, since all media organizations in their countries were independent and Governments were not in a position to take action in that regard.

38. Several representatives welcomed the reference to the mutual responsibility of men and women to sustain and support family life, practically as well as financially. One representative recognized the unequal sharing of family responsibilities as a specific critical area of concern affecting women's participation in all spheres of life. Another representative suggested recognizing that different types of families were an expression of the transformation of society. It was stated that the International Year of the Family, proclaimed for 1994, should accelerate its efforts to encourage women and men to combine family and work responsibilities in a more balanced manner.

39. Several representatives stated that the section on strategic objectives needed further elaboration and strengthening. Too rigid divisions of responsibility among Governments, non-governmental organizations and the United Nations should be avoided. Greater correlation between the sections on critical areas of concern and on strategic objectives would add to the overall coherence of the platform. The representatives of United Nations specialized agencies suggested that it could be enhanced by a concise statement setting forth the strategic nature of each objective, time-bound targets, and the establishment of incentives and support measures for their attainment. Concerted action should be based on the regional conferences and other preparatory activities.

40. Representatives emphasized that efficient financial arrangements needed to be provided and sufficient financial and human resources mobilized. They urged international financial institutions and the private sector to make contributions. The cost of all future action should be determined, and allocations for mainstream action needed to specify the resources devoted to the improvement of the situation of women.

41. With regard to institutional arrangements, one representative suggested that the strengthening of national machinery should be dealt with in its own right as a logical outcome of the critical areas of concern. Some of the characteristics of an efficient national machinery, such as clear identity, political support from the highest level and a cross-cutting and interdisciplinary mandate, mobilization and maintenance of adequate financial and human resources, collection of relevant information on policy-making processes and liaison with focal points in all relevant departments and agencies, could be applied at the international level. It was suggested that the role and place of the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and the Division for the Advancement of Women and other relevant United Nations units should be reconsidered. The first step could be an expert group meeting on the subject. Another representative stated that it might be useful to evaluate the efficiency of exercises such as the United Nations system-wide medium-term plan and the establishment of focal points for women. Other representatives proposed enhancing the role of the United Nations in promoting strategies for the advancement of women and improving the coordination of activities and programmes

within the United Nations, including reinforcement of the Division for the Advancement of Women.

42. Representatives of specialized United Nations agencies suggested establishing a core structure concerned with coordinating, monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the platform for action required at the international, regional and national levels. At the international level, a comprehensive and open dialogue and a record of experience between multi- and bilateral organizations and representatives of civil society should be an integral part of the institutional arrangements.